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Routledge Handbook of Street Culture

Book edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross,

Review by Jason Luger, Northumbria University

Recent years have seen a proliferation of “Companions” and “Handbooks” from large presses such as Routledge, raising questions of the value of such works in a seemingly oversaturated field. So, I approached the *Routledge Handbook of Street Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross, with some trepidation, curious how such a broad, cross disciplinary theme could be brought together in a manner not messy or unwieldy. At first glance this volume – with 41 contributing authors, 30 individual chapters and nearly 400 pages – would seem rather insurmountable. But upon delving into the chapters, I was reminded why a topic like “Street Culture” warrants a “Handbook” of this scope and breadth and will be of interest for critical/radical human geographers and an array of others. For the street, and its performances, contestations, representations, subversions, politics and cultures, is wider than any single discipline or academic journal. Understanding the street demands approaches, cases, experiments and methodologies from fields across the built environment, social sciences and humanities, and perhaps the unique value-add of a “Handbook” is its ability to curate such conversations and disciplinary juxtapositions in ways that would not otherwise occur.

It is this sweep of broad lenses (and disciplinary viewpoints) that jumps out most strikingly, from the editor’s criminal justice framing to voices across political science; art and design; architecture and urban studies; human geography; criminal justice and criminology; law, linguistics, musicology, and film. Geographies included in the volume span across Latin America, North America, Europe, Australia/ Pacific and Southeast Asia, though voices from

Africa would have been welcomed. Ross notes in their *Introduction* that a key thrust of the volume was a desire to explore the “transnational nature of street culture(s)” and not to apply an “American frame of reference to what is, for all intents and purposes, a global phenomenon” (xxvii). That most of the chapters are from North American, European or Australian perspectives (all but three) seems to indicate that this was only partially accomplished, especially given the essentiality of street cultures to the Global South and informal urban communities. Still, the volume presents an impressive sweep of themes and voices made possible by the format and scale of such a “Handbook” which by nature includes a large roster of contributors and is digestible by a wide audience.

Peter Manning’s Foreword (pg. xxxi to xxxvi) positions the volume as in the lineage of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, which fits given the centrality of crime, code-switching, and everyday cultures to the chapters’ contents. Chicago School ethnography, however, is not without its critics. Dear and Flusty (1998), for example, suggest that Chicago School approaches can be over-deterministic (such as the passé ‘concentric-ring’ model of urbanism). As Deegan (2001:21) notes, “...the white, male, middle-class perspective of many Chicago sociologists raises many obvious issues.” While masculinities come across strongly in the volume, women and feminist voices seem to be a bit of a blind-spot. Where, for example, is the *flâneuse*, or *la callejera*? There are specific moments where this gap especially comes across. Chapter 7, for example (Daichendt, pg. 90-103) highlights ‘The street art phenomenon’ using Western global city exemplars like London and New York, and primarily White-male ‘street artists’ like Banksy, Shepard Fairey and Kenny Scharf. Likewise, Chapter 10 (Gilchrist and Osborn, pg. 126-136) explores parkour as street culture, but there is a rich body of work in urban studies on parkour, urban space and gender (especially feminist perspectives) worth acknowledging, e.g., Lamb (2014), or Ong (2018).

Nor does a link to the Chicago School necessarily achieve Ross's aim for a global, transnational exploration. Certainly, the sociology of Park, Wirth (and more recently) Anderson (2000, a non-White perspective) and Cresswell (e.g, 2019) are useful and valuable guides for approaching street cultures in an holistic and humanistic sense, but not necessarily a global and decolonised one.

The volume is divided into 4 sections: "*I. Actors and Street Culture*"; "*II. Activities Connected to Street Culture*"; "*III. The Centrality of Crime to Street Culture*" and "*IV. Representations of Street Culture*". The first section ("Actors") covers themes such as homelessness and ethnic minorities, youth activity, street performers and police-community negotiations. Section II ("Activities") considers issues like graffiti and street art; skateboarding and parkour; taxi driving and bike messengers; scavenging and gentrification; masculinities and food vending. Section III ("The Centrality of Crime") focuses on the codes and implicit behaviors of street culture, and questions of identity and alienation. Section IV ("Representations of Street Culture") delves through popular culture's images and imaginaries of the street and its myriad cultures.

The 4-pronged structure does not quite fully-fit the sweep of the chapters, since many themes and topics are repeated (albeit through different cases, disciplinary approaches and methodologies) throughout. It would seem to me that most of the chapters address, in some way, all of the four themes: "Actors", "Activities", "Centrality of Crime", and "Representations", so the question arises of whether this structure is a hold-over, perhaps, from an earlier call for papers or series of conference sessions that may not quite match the final collection. For example, the emphases on masculinities and 'coding'; movement and

mobility; surveillance and control; art and popular culture; seem to be central themes that connect several sections together. Perhaps something along these lines would have been a more logical way of grouping the volume together. Still, this is a small structural critique, rather than one aimed at the discussions therein, which are generally excellently-written and will achieve the goal of connecting well with targeted audiences (stated by Ross as upper-level university students and graduate students, xxiv). The brief introductions by Ross preceding each of the four sections are particularly welcomed, and useful.

Despite the hiccups with overall framing and structure, the collection is well-curated. Crime and surveillance rightly form a central spine, since the street cannot be discussed without mention of the “eyes” that, produce, and guard it. Several of the chapters negotiate digitality and the cyber-street through creative methods like social media analysis (e.g. Chapters 5, 23 and 30), without an over-emphasis on “the digital street” (a frequent, but problematic separation, as if people actually walk and interact physically in cyberspace). The “gig economy” shows up, (11, Spinney and Popan), and the complex tensions and negotiations between public and private micro-spaces in street cultures (13, Piazzoni and Hue-Tam). Masculinity, so important in contemporary struggles playing out on the streets (from the tragic murders of Black youth by police to White-nationalist insurgencies across the West), is addressed by Mullins and Kavish (15, pg. 183-193); and much of Part III (pg. 205-268). The suburbs (often missing from discussions on ‘street’) are examined by Singer (21, 249-258). Section IV is a fun whirl through Hollywood, photography, music, fashion, advertising and brands, street food and social media’s representation of the street. This is insightful at the same time that it feels cursory (and very North American). What about Bollywood, K-pop, or WeChat? Perhaps these facets were beyond the scope of the collection, but there is much

accessible and recent literature out there across the relevant disciplines to the volume that perhaps a wider call for chapters might have swept up.

In summary, the *Handbook of Street Culture* (Routledge) brings disciplines into conversation with each other around a few central themes surrounding the street in a way only possible in such a wide volume. As a primer and discussion starter, it is a successful collection; the entry point toward much further exploration, which no doubt readers will value. For human geographers, the volume has great cross-disciplinary appeal and may connect readers to sources not typically summoned from fields such as criminal justice, architecture and design, and media studies. As an heir to Chicago School sociology, the book successfully updates conversations on place, crime, observation, performance, race, identity, sociality and representation for the 2020s. As a global, trans-national “over-arching treatment of street culture” (Ross, xxvii), the volume comes up short. But then again, perhaps that is not the role of Routledge Handbooks.

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